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The St. Peter's Mystery

The Italian magistrate who has been investigating the shooting of Pope John Paul II two years ago is about to produce his report.

The most sensational aspect of the assassination attempt is the charge that the gunman, Ali Agca, an escaped Turkish convict, had a "Bulgarian connection." Given the close Soviet-Bulgarian ties, this could lead ultimately to the Soviet KGB. Intelligence experts disagree over the Bulgarian-KGB role in the attempted assassination. The CIA doubts the conspiracy, while Israeli and West German intelligence officials are convinced of it.

So the report of the Italian investigator is eagerly awaited by the intelligence community. I've had access to some of the same secret material the Italian magistrate has received. Here are some of the main points he has pondered in reaching the conclusions he'll soon report:

- An enormous sum of money was spent springing Agca from a Turkish prison in November 1979 and financing his subsequent travels in Europe up to the day he shot the pope in St. Peter's Square. Intelligence sources told my associate, Dale Van Atta, that Turkish officials believe the amount may have been as high as \$5 million.

A half-dozen Turkish prison guards were bribed to get Agca out of jail, and he lived high off the hog in Western Europe during the 18 months before the assassination attempt. Italian officials have estimated that the once-penniless fugitive went through \$50,000 of somebody's money during his travels. The question is: whose?

- Though Agca was a member of the Gray Wolves, the private terrorist army of the neo-fascist National Action Party of Turkey, his depiction as an ideological fanatic of any persuasion has been described by various sources as "a canard." One source called him "a cold customer [who would] shoot his own mother as easily as he would crush an ant—strictly a hired killer."

- In December 1979, Agca was spotted in Tehran in the company of known leftists. This was a few weeks after the Iranians seized the U.S.

Embassy and took the American hostages.

- One of Agca's powerful connections was a Turkish gun-runner named Abuzer Ugurlu, whose Sofia-based operations were controlled by the Bulgarian secret police. Agca spent nearly two months in Sofia in the summer of 1980 and may have visited Ugurlu's luxurious villa there.

- A stronger Bulgarian connection is Bekir Celenk, a Turk who has been linked both to Ugurlu and the Turkish-Bulgarian underworld traffic in drugs and arms.

Agca has fingered Celenk as the man who offered him 3 million deutschmarks (about \$1.7 million at the time) to shoot the pope. He has also told his Italian interrogators that it was Celenk who introduced him to members of the Bulgarian secret police—three of whom have since been charged with complicity in the assassination attempt.

When his name surfaced in the inquiry, Celenk called a press conference and insisted he was "just an honest businessman" operating strictly legitimate enterprises. But U.S. and other Western intelligence sources believe Celenk is a major morphine dealer who launders the proceeds of his illicit trade through his businesses in West Germany. Certainly it would have been possible for Celenk to provide 3 million deutschmarks for the pope's assassination—the money coming from either his legal or illegal activities. Again, there's an unanswered question: why?

One thing is clear, though. Sofia has become a crossroads—the central bazaar, so to speak—in the lucrative international traffic in dope and weapons. Terrorists, smugglers, underworld financiers and gunrunners all meet in Sofia, under the watchful eye of the Bulgarian secret police.

West German marks coming from dope addicts wind up buying arms for Middle Eastern terrorist groups. Additional money comes from the Soviets, who have a keen interest in stirring up internal strife in the Middle East—particularly in Turkey, the solid anchor on NATO's southeast flank.

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